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Two Comparative Forms in Vaiphei

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0. Vaiphei Language

The Vaiphei language is a Northern Kuki-Chin language with basic word order of SV / AOV agglutinative and syllable structure (C)V(V)(V)(C) / T. The speakers are found mainly in and around Manipur State and the number of speakers is estimated around 50,000, which is a bit smaller than the actual number of registered population because of ongoing assimilation with Thadou or Mizo. It has high mutual intelligibility with other Northern Kuki-Chin languages like Paite, Tiddim Chin, Zou, Simte, Sizang, Thadou, amongst all Gangte being the closest, and partially with some other Kuki-Chin languages. The peculiar trait of Vaiphei which separates from others is the smallness or simplicity of phonological system. It lacks voiceless lateral fricative /ɬ/ or voiceless nasal /ɱ/, which are quite often found in other Kuki-Chin languages. Tonal variation is also limited and perceived even by native speakers as indistinct or inconsistent. Only one existing grammar on this language in English is [A.K. Suantak 2013] (available online). The presenter here has worked on this language for 2 years with 4 months of fieldwork and visited 8 villages in Manipur. Dialectal variances within this language is still not clear but at least it has 3 variants of south-western, northern and eastern group as observed from field study and characterized by conspicuous Thadouism or Mizoism on regional basis. Many of speakers in northern region of Manipur are being assimilated with Thadous and their dialect is getting endangered, or perhaps creating newer variants between Vaiphei and Thadou. The main informant of this study are K. V. (in his thirties, from commoner clan) and M. S. (in his forties, from chief clan). Both speakers were brought up in villages in northeastern part of Manipur and trilingual in Vaiphei, Manipuri and English. M. S. also speaks Hmar and Thadou and has a good understanding of Mizo.

Vowels

/a, a:, i, i:, u, u:, e, e:, o, ɔ, ɔ:/

/o/ only appears as the first part of diphthong /oɤ/.

ex. thokâng / t^hoɤ.ka:ŋ/ ‘mosquito’

The vowel length loses its distinction at the end of open syllables.

ex. vaw /vɔ/ or /vɔ:/ ‘to hit’

Semi-Vowels

/ɨ, ʉ/ (-j, w/)

These are observed only as second or tertial components of diphthongs or triphthongs. However, in loanwords from Manipuri they behave as consonant.

ex. wayen /wajɨn/ ‘law’

Consonants

		Labial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Nasals		m	n	ŋ	
Plosives	non-aspirated	p	t	k	ʔ
	aspirated	p ^h	t ^h	k ^h	
	voiced	b	d	g	
Affricates			ts		
Fricatives	voiceless	f	s		h
	voiced	v	z		
Approximants			l		

Marginal consonantal phonemes are /ɾ/ and pharyngealized /ʕ/.

/ɾ/ is mostly found in loanwords and some minor onomastics or lesser-known names of flora and fauna, which makes it dubious as an inherent phoneme of this language.

/ʕ/ appears only at coda position and actually has minimal pairs with /l/, and even it can be orthographically distinguished.

sal /sal/ ‘slave’ vs. salh /saʕ/ ‘to light, to cast light on’

bal /baʕ/ ‘to be broken’ vs. balh /baʕ/ ‘filthy’

When /ʕ/ is at the coda, the vowel before it is always short.

Some speakers do not pronounce this /ʕ/ at all or often omit the pharyngealization of the consonant inadvertently. It is very likely that this phoneme is already disappearing from the inventory.

/k^h/ is often realized as [x]~[χ].

Tones

There are at least 2 distinct tones of level³³ and falling⁴², and various pitch patterns are realized as a result of tone sandhi and sentential intonations. [A.K. Suantak 2013] suggests 3-way system of tones with 'rising' tone, but the presenter here couldn't corroborate this as significant tonal element. In this paper the numericals on the right shoulder of each gloss shows 5 levels of pitch. Pitch 5 appears mostly at the first syllable of the 3 person singular pronoun 'amà' or on the ending particle 'o'. Pitch 1 is only observed at the sequence of falling tones. In this language a quite huge number of homophones with identical tone is heard. Some speakers suggest or try to produce different tonal patterns when asked about how to differentiate them but those attempts are always inconsistent and eventually not phonemical at all. Compared to other neighbouring Kuki-Chin languages, it is likely that the tonal distinctions of this language is already in partial attrition.

Personal Pronouns and Basic Sentence Structure

Vaiphei personal pronouns has independent and affix forms, the former being subject or object of the sentence and the latter is affixed to nouns or verbs to indicate possession or mark the agent of the verb. A sentence is completed by placing sentence finishing / ending particle *hì*.

Independent Forms

	singular	plural
1	kei / ka	ei-haw (inclusive) / kei-u (exclusive)
2	nang	nang-u / nang-haw
3	ama	ama-u / ama-haw

Prefix Forms

	singular	plural
1	ka-	i- (inclusive) / ka- (exclusive)
2	la-	la-
3	a-	a-

Note

Sample sentences with head numbers are written in current Vaiphei orthography adopted by Bible translations and many other publications, though hyphens or diacriticals are usually not indicated. All the examples in this paper were elicited from the native speaker K.V. through questions in English or Manipuri and then double-checked by another native speaker M. S.

CIT. citation, CMPR. comparative, COP. copula, DAT. dative, DST. distal, ERG. ergative, FIN. sentence finishing (/ ending) particle, INST. instrumental (/ purposive), INTRG. interrogative, LOC. locative, NEG. negative, NMLZ. nominalizer, OBL. oblique, PST. past, PERF. perfective, PRHB. prohibitive, PRXM. proximal

1. Basic Forms of Comparative of Stative Verbs

Vaiphei comparative forms are obtained by suffixing *-zaw* (/zɔ³³/) or *-diak* (/diek⁴²/) to stative verbs. The object of comparison is followed by postposition *sângìn* 'than'.

1.1 Comparative Using *-zaw*

(1) Amà hì nang sângìn a-upà-zaw hì.

<i>A⁵ma³²</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>	<i>naŋ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>u⁴pa³²</i>	<i>-zɔ²²</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>
3SG	PRXM	2SG	than	3SG	old	CMPR	FIN

He is older than you.

(2) Tokyo chu Delhi sângìn a-lian-zaw hì.

<i>Toŋ⁴³kjəu³²</i>	<i>tsu⁴⁴</i>	<i>De⁴li⁴²</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>lien⁴²</i>	<i>-zɔ²²</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>
Tokyo	DST	Delhi	than	3SG	big	CMPR	FIN

Tokyo is bigger than Delhi.

sângìn is derived from stative verb *sâng* 'to be high' and can co-occur with it.

(3) Kei hì nang sângìn ka-sâng-zaw hì.

<i>Kei³³</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>	<i>naŋ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>ka⁴-</i>	<i>sa:ŋ³³</i>	<i>-zɔ²²</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>
1SG	PRXM	2SG	than	1SG	tall	CMPR	FIN

I am taller than you.

Comparatives of adverbs are formed by adding instrumental / purposive marker *in* after (adjective) *-zaw*.

(4) Nang sângìn chanchùm-zaw in ka-chia hì.

<i>Naŋ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>tsan³³tsum⁴²</i>	<i>-zɔ²²</i>	<i>in⁴²</i>	<i>ka⁵-</i>	<i>tsje⁴³</i>	<i>hì³²</i>
2SG	than	slow	CMPR	INST	1SG	go	FIN

I go (walk) slower than you do.

This *-zaw* comparative is most frequently used for neutral comparison, while Vaiphei has another comparative *-diak* form for comparing the degree of things with same quality.

1.2 Comparative Using *-diak*

(5) Amà hì nang sângìn a-upà-diak hì.

<i>A⁵ma³²</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>	<i>naŋ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>u⁴pa³²</i>	<i>-diek²¹</i>	<i>hì⁴²</i>
3SG	DST	2SG	than	3SG	old	CMPR	FIN

He is older than you. / He is still older than you.

This sentence differs from (1) only by changing *-zaw* to *-diak*, but it suggests or requires a precondition that 'he' and 'you' are both already old enough from the viewpoint of the speaker and states that 'he' is still older.

The contrast between *-zaw* and *-diak* is further illustrated below.

(6) Meiteite sangìn Telugute a-pau-ngêi-zaw-u hì.

<i>Mei⁴⁴te⁴⁴</i>	<i>-te³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>	<i>Te³lu⁴gu⁴⁴</i>	<i>-te³³</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>paɯ³³</i>	<i>ŋe:⁴⁴</i>	<i>-zɔ³³</i>	<i>-u²</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>
Meitei	PL	than	Telugu	PL	3SG	speak	excess	CMPR	PL	FIN

Telugu people are louder than Meitei people.

(7) Meiteite sangìn Telugute a-pau-ngêi-diak-u hì.

Telugu people are still louder than Meitei people.

(6) only states that Telugus are simply louder than Meiteis without any information on the Meiteis while (7) assumes that Meiteis are already known to be loud or noisy among the participants of conversation or speech, and then says Telugus are still louder than them.

(8) Taiwan theihai-haw chu India theihai-haw sângìn a-tù-i-zaw-u hì.

<i>Tai³³wan⁴⁴</i>	<i>the³³ha⁴⁴</i>	<i>-hɔ³³</i>	<i>tsu⁴⁴</i>	<i>In³³dia³³</i>	<i>the³³ha⁴⁴</i>	<i>-hɔ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³in⁴²</i>
Taiwan	mango	PL	DST	India	mango	PL	than
<i>a³-</i>	<i>tui⁴²</i>	<i>-zɔ²</i>	<i>-u²</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>			
3SG	tasty	CMPR	PL	FIN			

Taiwanese mangos are tastier than Indian ones.

(9) Taiwan theihai-haw chu India theihai-haw sângìn a-tù-i-diak-u hì.

Taiwanese mangos are still tastier than Indian ones.

The speaker of sentence (9) with *-diak* comparative thinks that both Taiwanese and Indian mangos are tasty and still judges that Taiwanese ones are better. On the other hand (8) is just neutral statement and doesn't even exclude the possibility that the speaker dislikes Indian ones or might perhaps consider them as bad. So sentence (8) can be used for comparison between [+tasty] and [±tasty] but (9) is only employed for between [+tasty] and [+tasty].

The joint form of *-zaw-diak* also exists and it expresses emphasized or gapped comparative.

(10) Taiwan theihai-haw chu India theihai-haw sângìn a-tù-i-zaw-diak-u hì.

Taiwanese mangos are far tastier than Indian ones.

**-diak-zaw* is not found and denied by native speakers.

-*diak* comparative forms are also used for expressing subjective or personal judgment for ambiguous situations to describe. When a speaker sees a bluey-greenish or greeny-bluish matter which is really hard to decide which color it is, you ask;

(11) Zia rong hì bang rong a-hem?

<i>Zi^{e33}</i>	<i>rɔŋ³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>	<i>baŋ²³</i>	<i>rɔŋ³³</i>	<i>a²-</i>	<i>hem⁴²</i>
this	color	DST	what	color	3SG, PFX	COP, INTRG

What color is this?

Then speaker answers;

(11a) Zia rong hì a-green-*diak* hì.

<i>Zi^{e33}</i>	<i>rɔŋ³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>	<i>a³⁻</i>	<i>gri:n³³</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>hi²¹</i>
this	color	DST	3SG	green	CMPR	FIN

It's rather green.

But another guy argues against that;

(11b) Ei pùai, a-blue-zaw-*diak* hì.

<i>Ei⁴⁴</i>	<i>puɔi⁴²</i> ,	<i>a³⁻</i>	<i>blu⁴⁴</i>	<i>-zɔ³³</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>hi²¹</i>
no	NEG, FIN	3SG	blue	CMPR	CMPR	FIN

No, it's blue.

Here the emphasized -*zaw-diak* form is used, perhaps in a blaming way, to assert that blueness wins over greenness in (11b) speaker's opinion. In these examples English words 'blue' and 'green' are used also in Vaiphei sentences because the distinction between blue and green in the language is rather vague and often expressed with the same word, *ang*.

The difference between -*zaw* and -*diak* is still more highlighted in negative sentences.

(12) Amà hì nang sângìn a-upà-zaw pùai.

<i>A³ma³²</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>	<i>naŋ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³ in⁴²</i>	<i>a³⁻</i>	<i>u⁴pa³²</i>	<i>-zɔ²²</i>	<i>puɔi³²</i> .
3SG	this	2SG	than	3SG	old	CMPR	NEG, FIN

He is not older than you.

(13) Amà hì nang sângìn a-upà-*diak* pùai.

He is no older than you.

(12) is the negation of sentence (1) and means that "he is younger than you" or "he is at / around the same age as you" while (13) reduces the degree of comparison of (5) to zero and is understood only as "his age doesn't have any difference as yours" or simply "at the same age".

In negative sentences *-diak* does not presupposes the same quality among the comparables. (5) is remarked only for whom the speaker considers old enough but (13) can be said about very young pairs or those seemingly with age gaps to be negated actually.

The negative of *-zaw-diak* denotes stronger negation of comparative and emphasizes the sameness of degree or completely erases the gap.

(14) Russia thokâng-haw hì India thokâng-haw sângìn a-tâwm-zaw-diak pùai.

<i>Ro³sia³²</i>	<i>t^hoŋ³³ka.ŋ⁴⁴</i>	<i>-hɔ³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>	<i>In³³dia³³</i>	<i>t^hoŋ³³ka.ŋ⁴⁴</i>	<i>-hɔ³³</i>	<i>saŋ³³.in⁴²</i>
Russia	mosquito	PL	PRXM	India	mosquito	PL	than
<i>a³-</i>	<i>tɔ:m⁴⁴</i>	<i>-zɔ³³</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>puɔŋ²¹</i>			
3SG	few	CMPR	CMPR	NEG, FIN			

Russian mosquitos are no fewer at all than Indian ones. (Mosquitos in Russia are as many as those in India.)

Comparison of the same degree uses *gual in* in stead of *sângìn* and omits *-zaw* or *-diak*.

(15) Taiwan theihai-haw chu India theihai-haw gual in a-tùi-u hì.

Taiwanese mangos are as tasty as Indian ones.

2. Comparative Forms of Action Verbs

Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages, action verbs can also be turned into comparative forms. When *-zaw* is combined to action verbs, it expresses comparative or selectional will of choice to (unenthusiastically) do the action.

(16) Lekhabù ka-sim-zaw hì.

<i>Le³k^ha³bu⁴²</i>	<i>ka³-</i>	<i>sim⁴⁴</i>	<i>-zaw³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>
book	1SG	read	CMPR	FIN

I would rather read a book. (because there's no other better way to spend time)

In the case *-diak* is used instead, it means doing the action a lot or repeatedly.

(17) Lekhabù ka-sim-diak hì.

I (will) read books more.

The object of comparison is not explicitly shown here, but it is well presumed that the speaker of (16) chooses to read after comparing some other inattractive choices and (17) implies doing 'than usual' or comparing the extent of intensity or frequency of the same action.

(18) Nang sângìn ka-ne-diak hì.

<i>Nanj³³</i>	<i>sanj³³in⁴²</i>	<i>ka³-</i>	<i>ne⁴⁴</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>hi²¹</i>
2SG	than	1SG	eat	CMPR	FIN

I eat more than you do.

In this example it presupposes 'I' and 'you' eat a lot and the speaker claims to eat still more.

The *-diak* in this sentence cannot be replaced by *-zaw*.

(18)' *Nang sângìn ka-ne-zaw hì.

Yet still *-zaw* can be used by serializing stative verb *tam* 'to be much in extent' or 'to be abundant' after the verb 'to eat'.

(19) Nang sângìn ka-ne-tam-zaw hì.

<i>Nanj³³</i>	<i>sanj³³in⁴²</i>	<i>ka³-</i>	<i>ne³³</i>	<i>tam⁴⁴</i>	<i>-zaw³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>
2SG	than	1SG	eat	much	CMPR	FIN

I eat more than you do.

If this *-zaw* is changed to *-diak* again,

(20) Nang sângìn ka-ne-tam-diak hì.

I eat still more than you do.

This means the same as (18), and

(21) Nang sângìn tam-diak ìn ka-ne hì.
I eat still more than you do.

is also possible as comparative of adverb.

Preference of actions can be expressed using *-zaw* by serializing action verbs with another verb *nùam* 'to want'.

(22) Ken pawlâm-ah pâwt sângìn ìnn ah lekhabu sim ka-nuàm-zaw hì.

<i>Ken</i> ³³	<i>pɔ̌ lam</i> ⁴²	<i>-aɽ</i> ²²	<i>pɔ̌:t</i>	<i>səŋ</i> ³³	<i>in</i> ⁴²	<i>-aɽ</i> ²²	<i>Le³k^ha³bu</i> ⁴	<i>sim</i> ³³
1SG, ERG	outside	LOC	go out	than	house	LOC	book	reading
<i>ka</i> ³ -	<i>nuɔm</i> ⁴²	<i>-zɔ̌</i> ²²	<i>hi</i> ⁴²					
1SG	want	CMPR	FIN					

I would rather read a book in the house than go out.

In this case *-zaw* cannot be changed to *-diak* to make any sense. The comparative form *-diak* in positive sentences can only treat comparison among those with the same quality or the same kind of actions based on a shared measurement.

The comparative form *-zaw* also marks unexpectedness or reversal.

(23) Soviet Russia gam-ah lekha-zâwk ìn nang sim-zaw in-a.

<i>Sɔ̌ viet</i> ³³	<i>Ro³sia</i> ³²	<i>gam</i> ⁴²	<i>-aɽ</i> ²²	<i>le³k^ha³</i> ³	<i>zɔ̌.k</i> ³²	<i>in</i> ⁴²	<i>naŋ</i> ³³
Soviet	Russia	country	LOC	book	instead	INST	2SG
<i>sim</i> ³³	<i>-zɔ̌</i> ³³	<i>ĩn</i>	<i>-a</i> ³²				
read	CMPR	FUT	3SG				

In Soviet Russia book reads you.

The postpositional phrase *zâwk ìn* after 'book' syntactically behaves just like *sângìn* and the first part *zâwk* looks very much like *-zaw*, possibly a cognate but its origin is not clear.

Negative sentences with comparative forms of action verbs plus 'want' show further difference of nuances.

(24) Bù ka-ne-nuàm-zaw pùai.

<i>Bu</i> ⁴²	<i>ka</i> ³ -	<i>ne</i> ⁴⁴	<i>nuɔm</i> ⁴²	<i>-zɔ̌</i> ²²	<i>puɔĩ</i> ⁴²
rice	1SG	eat	want	CMPR	NEG, FIN

I don't rather want to eat. / I would rather not eat.

(25) Bù ka-ne-nuàm-diak pùai.

I don't want to eat. / I have no appetite. / I can't eat.

(24) is simply a choice of not eating on a particular situation, perhaps the speaker eats a couple of minutes later or just hates to eat *bù* 'rice' and maybe wants bread instead. On the other hand the speaker of (25) has stomach problem or is anorexic for a certain length of time, not just because he feels full.

If the speaker just feels full and doesn't want to eat any, it can rightly be said as;

(25)' *Bù ka-ne-nuam pùai*.

I don't want to eat.

Here again the negative sentence with *-diak* comparative (25) has a connotation that the state of not eating has been continuing and still the speaker's appetite does not increase nor decrease.

The negation with *-diak* also implies partial negation or euphemism of negatives.

(26) School uniform *vàn a-ngai-diak pùai*.

<i>Sku:l³³</i>	<i>yu³ni³form³²</i>	<i>van⁴²</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>ŋai³³</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>puɔi²¹</i>
School	uniform	wear	3SG	obligatory	CMPR	NEG, FIN

You don't (necessarily) have to wear the school uniform.

If the *-diak* is removed from this sentence, the sense of negation becomes more straightforward;

(26)' School uniform *vàn a-ngai pùai*.

You don't have to wear the school uniform.

This (*verb*)-*diak pùai* sequence appears in most cases of partial negation.

(27) *Ka-pi hì khua sung-ah a-um-zing ti-na a-hi-diak pùai*.

<i>Ka³-</i>	<i>pi³³</i>	<i>hi⁴²</i>	<i>k^huɔ³³</i>	<i>suj³³</i>	<i>-aɿ⁴⁴</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>um⁴⁴</i>	<i>zing⁴⁴</i>
1SG	grammar	this	village	into	LOC	3SG	remain	continue
<i>ti³³</i>	<i>-na⁴⁴</i>	<i>a³-</i>	<i>hi³</i>	<i>-diek⁴²</i>	<i>puɔi²¹</i>			
CIT	NMLZ	3SG	COP	CMPR	NEG, FIN			

My grammar is not always in this village.

In this example *-diak* is suffixed to copula verb *hì* and it negates the embedded clause before the citation marker *ti*.

3. Tentative Conclusion

The concept of comparative basically consists of finding difference and choosing which has much or less of difference based on certain criteria. The essential meaning of the comparative form *-zaw* is choosing after recognizing the difference and *-diak* is describing the (added) difference between the objects of comparison. In this way the presenter tries to understand the subtle nuances of negative comparative sentences but it needs still much more research, especially on other Kuki-Chin languages as well.

Reference

[A.K. Suantak 2013] Suantak, A. Khawlsongkim, *Vaiphei Phonetics, Phonology and Morphology : A Descriptive Study*, Ph. D thesis submitted to Northeastern Hill University, 2013